

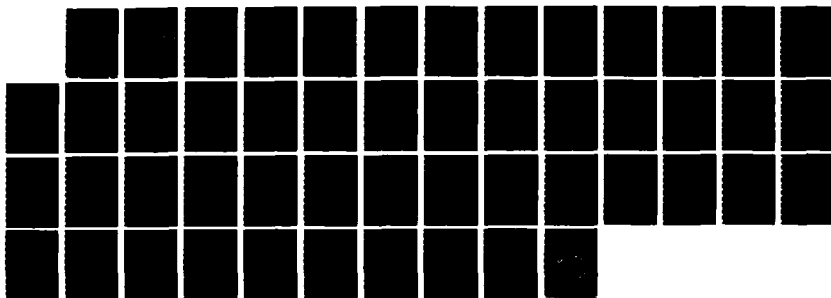
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THE DECISION TO TAKE A RISK: A PROCESS FOR EFFECTIVE  
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The Decision to Take a Risk:  
A Process for Effective High-Risk  
Decision Making at Senior Levels

by

Major Thomas C. Schmidt  
Infantry

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School of Advanced Military Studies  
U.S. Army Command and General Staff College  
Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas

10 April 1986

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Name of Student: Thomas C. Schmidt, Major, Infantry

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Senior Levels.

Approved By:

*James J. Schneider*  
\_\_\_\_\_  
(James J. Schneider, MA)

Monograph Advisor

*Richard Hart Sinnreich*  
\_\_\_\_\_  
(COL Richard Hart Sinnreich, MA)

Director, School of  
Advanced Military Studies

*Philip J. Brookes*  
\_\_\_\_\_  
(Philip J. Brookes, Ph. D.)

Director, Graduate  
Degree Programs

Accepted this 17<sup>th</sup> day of May 1986

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## ABSTRACT

### The Decision to Take a Risk: A Process for Effective High-Risk Decision Making at Senior Levels

✓ This study investigates the requirements for sound decision making at the operational level in conditions of high risk. The study first reviews some of the literature related to high-risk decision making. It then investigates two operational level decisions, General Mark Clark's decision to attack toward Rome in 1944 and General Douglas MacArthur's Inchon Landing decision in September, 1950.

The study identifies a process for decision making in conditions of high risk. The process includes considerations of the operational aim, considerations of key information requirements, assessments relating to the probability and impact of success and failure, and considerations of related actions designed to bolster the success of the high-risk decision. The study illustrates the proposed process by the review of the Rome and Inchon decisions..

The study concludes that while decision making in high-risk conditions is largely intuitive in nature, a sound decision-making process combined with the competence of the commander, will aid the operational level commander in making effective high-risk decisions.



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## SECTION I: INTRODUCTION

In September, 1950. General Douglas MacArthur took the high-risk option of conducting a deep amphibious enveloping maneuver along the Inchon coast of Korea in order to wrest the initiative from the enemy and break the demoralizing and destructive siege of the Pusan perimeter. The high-risk decision that General MacArthur made, contrary to the counsel of numerous senior commanders and staff officers, was singularly successful in achieving a great operational victory and turning the tide of the entire Korean War.

What was the process that General MacArthur followed in making his historic decision? How does a successful high-risk decision differ from an unsuccessful one? What are the key elements that constitute the successful high-risk decision process? This paper proposes a process for determining the advisability of high-risk options to achieve operational goals.

The renowned military philosopher, Carl von Clausewitz, noted that war is filled with uncertainty<sup>1</sup>. In recognizing this, FM 100-5, Operations, identifies the requirement for commanders to "act with courage and conviction in the uncertainty and confusion of battle."<sup>2</sup> Commanders must effectively operate in an environment of risk created in part by the uncertainty of war.

FM 100-5 further identifies the need for risk taking to gain

or maintain the initiative in battle.<sup>2</sup> In modern battle where uncertainty prevails, where resources are constrained, and where the will of the opposing commander is ever present, risk is inherent. FM 22-999, Leadership and Command at Senior Levels, lists risk taking as an essential quality of competence of the senior leader.<sup>4</sup> This paper seeks to derive effective methods of making operational-level decisions in a high-risk environment.

In this paper a high-risk decision is defined as a decision in which the chance for failure is equal to or greater than that of success. The commander objectively and subjectively assesses the payoff opportunities for each. A high-risk option is often considered because there may be no less risky method of achieving the operational objective. Resource constraints require the commander to accept great risk somewhere; the uncertainty of war imposes some risk everywhere. But, note that risk taking is not merely blind gambling. The commander objectively and subjectively assesses his risk and makes a decision whether and where to accept that risk.

In proposing a process for effective high-risk decision making, this paper begins in Section II by extracting from both military and non-military related literature some views on risk taking decisions. Section III describes two high-risk decisions, General MacArthur's decision to conduct the Inchon landing during the Korean War and General Mark Clark's decision to press the Fifth Army's attack toward Rome in World War II. Section IV

presents a process for effective high-risk decision making using the Inchon and Rome decisions to illustrate the process. The paper then concludes in Section V as it summarizes the process of effective high-risk decision making.

## SECTION II: RISK TAKING IN THE LITERATURE

Military writers throughout the ages have sought to find the key to making consistently sound decisions. Unfortunately, there is not a key, at best there is a general direction. German General Lothar Rendulic in his post-World War II writings stated that a decision is not a problem of simple arithmetic, but a creative act comprising intuition, a keen sense of perception, and the temperament of the commander. He continued that because of those characteristics,

...the process by which a decision is reached is, in the final analysis, nearly always a secret which, in most instances, remains insoluble even to the person who has arrived at the decision.<sup>2</sup>

Although the key to the process remains hidden, we can and will seek to discover the general direction to a sound high-risk decision process. Much of the literature on the subject can be placed in one of five general categories: the objective of the decision, the information requirements of the decision, the commander's qualities, characteristics of the decision, and the means used to bolster the success of the decision. Each will be summarized briefly.

### The Objective of the Decision

The first consideration to be made in any decision relates to the mission or operational goal the commander is seeking. General Rendulic stated that the foremost thought in every situation must be the main effort.<sup>3</sup> Clausewitz wrote that all

energies should be directed toward the enemy's center of gravity, the hub of all power and movement of the enemy force.<sup>7</sup>

Lieutenant Colonel Igor Gerhardt, a US Army officer who served on the faculty of CGSC, suggested that the mission given to the commander implies certain parameters within which he may accept levels of risk. The mission must be assessed for its criticality to the overall operational aim.<sup>8</sup> For example, if the commander's mission was essential to the overall success of the campaign, he might accept greater risk to his force to allow for greater accomplishment of the campaign aims. On the other hand, if the mission was less critical, the commander would place more emphasis on the protection of his force to ensure the force was available for future and perhaps more critical missions.

#### Information Requirements

Congressman Newt Gingrich, in remarks delivered at Fort Leavenworth in 1985, commented on the critical nature of complete information for the commander. He suggested combining both analytical and intuitive means of processing information.

We may want an algorithm section, in a sense, which lets me know how a Soviet commander is thinking in real detail and what his decision cycle tells him. Then I can intuit! Because more informed intuitors beat less informed intuitors. Although I think, theoretically in the biological model intuitors beat algorithms because they're faster.<sup>9</sup>

General Rendulic, writing in Command Decision, voiced the commander's need to make decisions based on consistent information requirements. Those requirements are closely related

to what the US Army knows as METT-T (mission, enemy, terrain, troops, and time available). Rendulic's list includes mission, friendly situation, enemy situation, terrain, and various intangibles such as environmental influences and uncertainty.<sup>10</sup>

Writing in NATO's Fifteen Nations in 1979, Irving R. Mirman, the deputy director of SHAPE Technical Centre, suggested that the first problem for the senior commander is to distinguish clearly between "data" and "information." He defines information as data which has a clear, valid military use at the time it is available. He then states that the main question is, "what essential information does the decision maker require to make his decision?"<sup>11</sup>

As stated earlier, "War is the realm of uncertainty."<sup>12</sup> Despite all of the technical advances in command, control, communications, and intelligence, war remains uncertain. Martin Van Creveld wrote in Command in War,

To believe that the wars of the future, thanks to some extraordinary technological advances yet to take place in such fields as computers or remotely controlled sensors, will be less opaque and therefore more subject to rational calculations than their predecessors is, accordingly, sheer delusion.<sup>13</sup>

The operational commander must consider that degree of uncertainty in making decisions of risk.

#### Commander's qualities

Without question, the personality, values, and character of the operational commander greatly influence his decision style

and consequently his predisposition to take risk. Innumerable books and articles have been written on these qualities. Suzanne Sisson wrote that people take risks based on their past experiences.<sup>14</sup> Kevin McKean suggested that a decision to take a risk is largely based on the decision maker's normal way of viewing alternatives, such as viewing a cup either half empty or half full.<sup>15</sup>

Authors frequently comment on the various personality factors that predispose a commander to make wise or unwise high-risk decisions, although they also frequently disagree on which factors influence in which way. In the new book, Military Leadership in Pursuit of Excellence, Thomas Cronin identifies qualities that assist effective risk taking. Among those qualities are creativity, irrational self confidence, and little fear of failure.<sup>16</sup> In that same book Morgan McCall suggests that creative, risk-taking leaders tend to be crafty, grouchy, dangerous, feisty, inconsistent, evangelistic, prejudiced, and spineless.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, Norman Dixon, writing in On the Psychology of Military Incompetence, argues that several of the above qualities are characteristics of incompetent rather than competent leaders.<sup>18</sup> In any case, the operational commander arrives at the point of decision with certain personality traits which predispose him one way or another; there is little he can do to change those traits immediately. Thus, this paper will not consider that factor much further.

### Characteristics of the Decision

General Rendulic suggested two qualities which assist in the effectiveness of the risk-taking decision. The first of those qualities is boldness. Rendulic recounts the quotation, "in case of doubt, the bolder decision is the better one."<sup>19</sup> He cautions that the principle may normally, but not always apply. Napoleon agreed that boldness is an admirable and often missing element in senior commanders. He also cautioned that boldness becomes rashness if not tempered by good judgment.<sup>20</sup>

Rendulic also stated that a quality of an effective decision is that it ensures that "initiative of action must be ours." He stated that the key to success is often adherence to our own purpose without, of course, crossing the border line from firmness to inflexibility.<sup>21</sup>

Napoleon and Clausewitz both agreed on the overriding importance of the commander's will on the decision. Napoleon was quoted as saying,

Once you have made up your mind, stick to it; there is no longer any if or but...

and

War is waged only with vigor, decision and unshaken will; one must not grope or hesitate.<sup>22</sup>

One characteristic of a decision is that it reflects the will of the commander.<sup>23</sup>



### Bolstering the Decision

Once the high-risk decision is made, there are methods to be considered in order to shore up the decision to provide greater assurance of success and greater ability to avoid catastrophic failure. General Rendulic suggested retaining a strong reserve or positioning the reserve in a prudent manner.<sup>24</sup> Correlli Barnett echoed Clausewitz in emphasizing the impact of surprise, secrecy, and swiftness to disarm the enemy's most effective defenses.<sup>25</sup> All of these serve to shore up and strengthen a high-risk decision.

Thus we see that much of the literature on high-risk decision making emphasizes the importance of the relationship of the decision to the larger objective, the gathering of essential information to make an effective decision, the relationship of the qualities of the commander to the decision, common characteristics of effective decisions, and finally the means to bolster and shore up a high-risk decision. We also find that much of the process of decision making is highly intuitive and therefore difficult to grasp and categorize. Nevertheless, in succeeding sections we will seek to find an effective process.

### SECTION III: HIGH-RISK EXAMPLES - INCHON AND ROME

The history of modern war is replete with examples of high-risk decision making by operational commanders. Many, such as the breakout in Operation COBRA in World War II, were conducted successfully; others, such as World War II's Operation MARKET GARDEN, failed to achieve the desired success. Both successful and unsuccessful decisions are worthy of study in order to glean lessons on high-risk decision making. This section will review one example of each, General MacArthur's highly successful decision to execute the Inchon landing in the fall of 1950 and General Mark Clark's less successful decision to attack toward Rome in the spring of 1944.

#### General MacArthur and Inchon, September 1950

Following the attack of North Korean forces into South Korea in 1950, General MacArthur was appointed Commander of the United Nations Forces in Korea. He inherited a dramatically deteriorating situation with the South Korean Army in full flight and Seoul already in enemy hands. US occupation forces in Japan were understrength and unprepared for fighting. MacArthur plugged gaps with Korean and UN forces in a successful attempt to slow the North Korean onslaught and to establish a defensive sector around Pusan from which a counteroffensive could be launched to destroy the North Korean invasion. By August, 1950, the Eighth Army under the command of LTG Walton E. Walker clung to the defensive perimeter around Pusan. The time had arrived to

plan for and decide on the counteroffensive.

The decision for the counteroffensive centered around three widely divergent options. The first was to attack directly from Pusan through the entire Korean Peninsula to reestablish South Korean integrity. The second was to conduct a flanking amphibious landing at Kunsan. The third and most risky option, which MacArthur favored and sponsored over the objections of most, provided for a deep envelopment of the enemy by amphibious attack toward Seoul.

This third option (sketch map on page 15) landed a Corps at the difficult beaches of Inchon. The deep insertion precluded a rapid link up with Eighth Army forces which would be attacking from Pusan. It risked the destruction of landing craft and forces in the difficult tides, hydrography, and terrain at Pusan. It also risked the possibility of North Korean forces defeating the X Corps in detail. For these reasons this option was strongly opposed by many senior Marine and Naval leaders as well as by members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Despite these hazards, the Inchon option provided for an immense opportunity to interdict North Korean lines of supply at a most vulnerable and critical point, thereby rendering the forces open to rapid defeat from converging UN forces.\*\*

These possibilities, combined with MacArthur's aggressive persistence, excellent salesmanship, and thorough planning led to the eventual acceptance of the Inchon option. Its ultimate execution and success stands as one of the finest accomplishments

in the Korean War and in MacArthur's exceptional career. The process by which that decision was made will be studied in the following section.

General Clark and Rome, May - June 1944

In the Spring of 1944, the Allied armies were prepared to continue their attack against stubborn German resistance up the Italian peninsula. The allies were attacking under the command of General Sir Harold R.L.G. Alexander, the commander of Allied Forces in Italy. The British Eighth Army was attacking up the eastern portion of Italy and the US Fifth Army under LTG Mark W. Clark was in the western zone. The VI(US) Corps of the Fifth Army, under MG Lucian K. Truscott was astride the enemy's flank on the Anzio beachhead following an amphibious landing in January, 1944.

General Alexander's plan for the Allied offensive was to have the British Eighth and US Fifth Armies continue attacking northwesterly toward Rome while the VI Corps from Anzio struck northeasterly to Valmontone to cut the lines of communication of the German Tenth Army. This was designed to block the Tenth Army's best route of withdrawal, possibly trap the main body of the enemy, and provide the best assistance for the attacking Eighth and Fifth Armies.<sup>27</sup>

General Clark resisted General Alexander's plan, preferring instead a plan which directed a large part of VI Corps on the most direct route toward Rome (sketch map on page 15). Clark saw Rome as the "great prize" of the entire bloody Italian

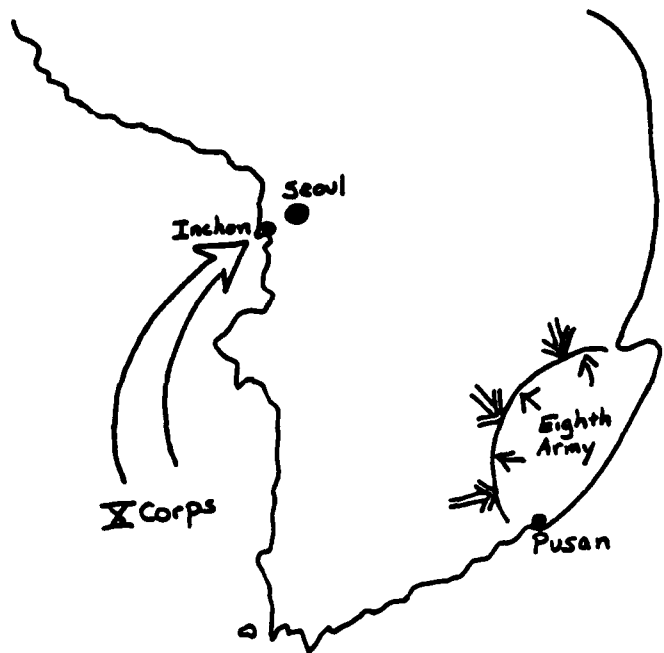
campaign and was insistent on reaching it before the British. He saw Rome, not Valmontone, as the "only worthwhile objective" for VI Corps.<sup>22</sup>

Clark's decision placed several elements at risk. His decision was in direct contravention of General Alexander's repeatedly expressed desires. The division of VI Corps into two diverging attacks limited the concentration of a force that was key to the entire Allied plan and risked the defeat or significant slowing of each attack. Clark justified the taking of both risks with two reasons. Primarily, he desired to have US forces to be the first in Rome. He felt this was deserved as US forces had borne the brunt of the fighting and thus had deserved the honor.<sup>20</sup> Secondly, he doubted that a single thrust by VI Corps toward Valmontone could have the decisive results expected by General Alexander.<sup>21</sup>

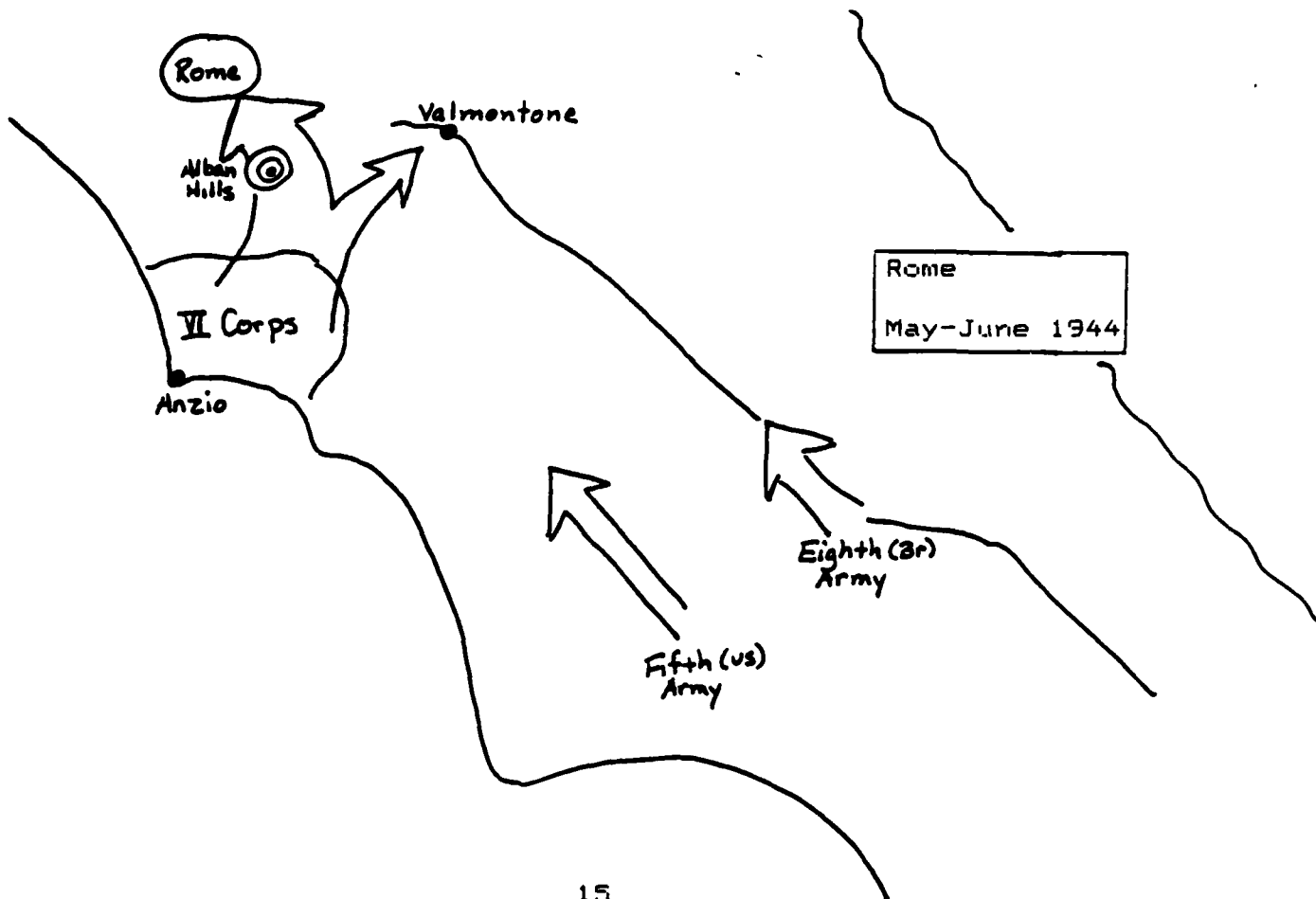
Clark directed the execution of his decision and handed General Alexander a fait accompli by notifying him of the decision through his Chief of Staff after the attack was put into motion.<sup>22</sup> The result of Clark's decision was that the attack neither quickly reached Rome nor cut the enemy's rear at Valmontone. It allowed the German Fourteenth Army to shift units into threatened sectors, thereby slowing the Allied attack in all areas. Rome was seized and the Germans were pushed north, but at a heavy toll in Allied lives and time. Clausewitz says that the possession of objects such as cities (unless a capital) and provinces may be a valid immediate objective, but never a valid

final one.<sup>22</sup> While Rome was the Italian capital, it had little operational relevance to the defeat of the Germans since Italy had already surrendered. General Clark made Rome, not the destruction of the enemy force, his major objective.

The Inchon and Rome decisions will both be used to amplify and describe the suggested process for high-risk decision making in the following section.



Inchon  
September 1950



Rome  
May-June 1944

#### SECTION IV: A PROCESS FOR HIGH-RISK DECISION MAKING

The operational commander must consider innumerable factors in making a decision of any significance. The size of the force he normally commands, the impact of his decisions on the operational and strategic aims of the war, and the diversity of the force he influences all necessarily involve an exceedingly complex decision making process. Yet the normal human mind requires some semblance of order and limit to the information it processes for a decision. In a high risk decision where the potential for failure and the impact of failure are great, the need for order in that process increases. Ordering the process makes it no less detailed or complex. But it does provide a more manageable means of handling the complexity.

This section provides a model for ordering the complex process of decision making under risk. It does not purport to provide a foolproof checklist of considerations in analyzing the advisability of a high-risk option. Decision making at the operational level is an art and consequently, such a checklist does not exist. This section does seek to identify major considerations for the operational commander in high-risk decision making.

The process includes four main areas for consideration in high-risk decision making: the operational aim, information considerations, assessment requirements, and decision-bolstering issues. Each will be described in this section using MacArthur's



Inchon decision and Clark's Rome decision as illustrations. A fifth consideration could arguably be added, that of the commander's qualities. However, the operational commander arrives at the point of decision with years of experience, training, and personality development that will remain largely unchanged and unable to be influenced significantly during the few days or hours of the decision-making process. Therefore, that consideration will not be discussed in this model except as it applies to the friendly situation.

#### The Operational Aim

The operational aim is the beginning and ending point of any decision at the operational level. It represents the "ends" which the commander seeks to achieve with his limited resources or "means." The means must be put to their best use to achieve or contribute to that portion of the ends which is achievable in the operation in question. When the contribution can be significant, the acceptance of a high-risk option may be advisable because of the large potential payoff of that risk. When the contribution is negligible, risk will often be inadvisable. Then the operational commander will be wise to more carefully protect his resources in order to apply them in a more critical action. Consider the contrast of Inchon and Rome.

General MacArthur's clear mission was to provide for the defense of Korea. This implied an operational aim of the destruction of North Korean forces in South Korea. Would Inchon significantly contribute to that operational aim? By MacArthur's

reasoning, Inchon would serve as a classic example of providing a major contribution to the operational aim. Noting the enemy's extended supply lines and location of those lines, as well as the massing of nearly all forces well south of Seoul, MacArthur reasoned that the operation provided the clear possibility of cutting the entire North Korean lines of communications, sealing off the southern portion of the peninsula, and consequently paralyzing the fighting power of the invaders.<sup>34</sup> Charles Willoughby and John Chamberlain, writing in the biography, MacArthur, 1941-1951, noted the relation of the high-risk Inchon option to the operational aim.

He (MacArthur) had made similar decisions throughout his military career, but none more momentous, none more fraught with danger, none that promised to be more conclusive if successful.<sup>35</sup>

We noted earlier that General Alexander's operational aim was different than the aim of General Clark. General Alexander sought to eliminate German forces from Italy on this operation by enveloping a large portion of the force at Valmontone. General Clark's aim was clearly different. Clark's stated purpose for violating the intentions of General Alexander was to ensure that the Americans received the Rome "prize." In fact, General Truscott stated that Clark had agreed that the Valmontone assault by the US VI Corps would probably be the most decisive, but not the quickest way to Rome.<sup>36</sup> Rome itself served only as a propaganda victory and an opportunity for personal and national glory. German defenses were crumbling; Rome was going to fall

in any case. In his diary entry of 30 May 1944 Clark writes, "Most of my worries have nothing to do with the immediate battle. They are political in nature ...."<sup>37</sup>

General Clark's first error in taking risk was to fail properly to consider the operational aim to which that option contributed. He obviously did not regard General Alexander's aim as significant. Clark's decision to split the VI Corps into two diverging attacks also revealed a lack of regard for the impact of his decision on his own operational aim. The rapid seizure of Rome was the goal. Clark's decision failed to pay due regard to his own goal. He chose an option that was both fraught with risk and offered little additional favorable impact on his operational aim.

#### Information Considerations

The need for detailed information in a high-risk situation is manifest. The complexity of the situation and potential impact of either success or failure require adequate identification of information requirements. In a statement of the obvious, Martin Van Creveld writes, "Everything else being equal, a larger and more complex task will demand more information to carry it out."<sup>38</sup> Information requirements are lumped into four categories: (1) the identification of essential information, (2) information on the enemy, (3) friendly force information, and (4) technical information. Each will be discussed in turn.

The first challenge is to identify what information is essential to the decision at hand. Beyond the obvious information requirements of enemy forces, terrain, weather, etc, the operational commander must focus his information gathering apparatus on those items that can significantly affect his success or failure. Writing on command and control in NATO, Irving Mirman suggested that a commander must make four types of decisions: information decisions, operational decisions, force decisions, and feedback decisions.<sup>39</sup> He needs to decide what type information should be sought.

General MacArthur personally directed much of the information gathering effort prior to the Inchon landing, focusing the effort in those areas that might affect the operation's success. He ordered numerous clandestine operations in the Inchon - Seoul area including hundreds of aerial photography missions, 250 parachute drops, 30 separate topographical studies of the beaches and approaches to Inchon, and he directed a G2 effort to cover the mouth of the Yalu River in anticipation of follow-on actions.<sup>40</sup> He anticipated the need for such information and therefore directed the execution of the most critical information-gathering efforts.

In nearly every battle decision, detailed information on the enemy is critically important. In a high-risk decision that information will often include at least three general categories: the general enemy situation, information relating to the enemy's capability to respond effectively to friendly success, and

information on his capability to exploit friendly failure. The need for the first of these is obvious; the latter two become increasingly necessary as risk rises. If the enemy is highly mobile and agile, he will likely be more capable of responding to our successful execution of a high-risk option, thereby reducing its potential favorable impact. Accordingly, he may be more capable of turning a high-risk failure on our part into a catastrophic loss by his aggressive exploitation of his advantage. Similarly, if the enemy is unimaginatively led, dependent on one source of supply, or lacking in mobility, then the high-risk option may result in exceptionally high payoff and contribution to the operational aim. Such information is invaluable in assessing the prudence of a high-risk decision.

General MacArthur carefully considered all three categories of enemy information in making his Inchon decision. His direction of aggressive intelligence operations into the Inchon - Seoul area combined with daily reports of forward enemy units in the Pusan area gave him accurate information on the enemy situation. MacArthur knew that the enemy had failed to prepare the beach defenses well and he knew that the enemy was in a precarious supply situation.<sup>41</sup>

Beyond the general enemy situation, MacArthur had information regarding the enemy's capacity to react effectively to either success or failure at Inchon. MacArthur's intelligence reported that the enemy's entire supply lines converged on Seoul and then diverged south of Seoul.<sup>42</sup> Thus, the enemy had little

ability to recover logistically from the severing of those lines at Seoul. Because of the positioning of nearly all North Korean forces in the extreme south and those forces' previous difficulty in fully exploiting success, MacArthur knew that the North Korean ability to exploit the failure of a US landing at Inchon was limited.

In contrast, General Clark's information on the enemy was less complete in the critical areas. A reading of the history of the Rome operation leads one to conclude that the information-gathering effort was either inadequate or was given little consideration. The decision seemed to be made more on instinct than on fact.

General Clark's information underestimated the strength of the defensive positions at the base of the Alban Hills, which were astride the axis of advance of his main VI Corps attacking force.<sup>43</sup> Clark foresaw no sizeable German reserves available to counter a heavy thrust toward Rome<sup>44</sup> when in fact the German commander, Kesselring, had the capability to move strategic reserves and shift tactical reserves to counter the area of the attack if German forces in contact could delay the success of the attack.<sup>45</sup> Finally, Clark felt that there were many escape routes out of the Liri Valley besides that of Highway 6 (considered by General Alexander to be the only way out for the Germans).<sup>46</sup> He felt that cutting the road at Valmontone would not achieve the overwhelmingly decisive results predicted by Alexander. Clark's information was incorrect. The bulk of the German Tenth Army

took a week to withdraw northward toward Valmontone.<sup>47</sup> During that time Kesselring and his commanders feared they would be trapped by a heavy force at Valmontone and would be handed a decisive defeat. Had he received accurate information on the enemy, Clark would have seen that he not only could have achieved Alexander's aim of enveloping the German force, but he also could have achieved his own aim of arriving in Rome early by attacking first toward Valmontone.

Another essential set of information requirements is that of information on friendly forces. This also falls into three general categories for high risk decisions. Those categories are information on the friendly situation, capability of the force to exploit a high risk success, and capability to respond to and survive failure.

General Clark did have information on each of these categories and did consider some of them in his decision. In some cases his consideration was faulty. Clark's decision to forgo a heavy thrust toward Valmontone was partially based on his lack of respect for the British Eighth Army's offensive skills. His experience led him to believe that they were unlikely to push hard or fast enough north to pressure the Germans, thereby not justifying the envelopment at Valmontone.<sup>48</sup> Additionally, at the time of his decision to attack with VI Corps directly toward Rome, he failed to consider the positioning of those forces. When given the order to change the attack, the Corps Commander, General Truscott, was "dumbfounded."<sup>49</sup> The plan required

excessive shifts in units including assembling scattered elements of the 34th Infantry Division, relieving the 1st Armored Division, and moving the 1st Armored Division across the rear of the 34th and 35th Divisions.<sup>50</sup> Truscott's inability to execute that change in direction immediately, despite some heroic efforts, reduced the favorable effect of the decision.

General Clark did consider the VI Corps strength after its fighting to break out of the beachhead at Cisterna. The VI Corps success at Cisterna and the availability of a reserve division led him to decide on the difficult maneuver.<sup>51</sup> Clark also considered the potential morale boost for his Fifth Army, including the attached French divisions, who had suffered the brunt of the bloody fighting up the peninsula and at the Anzio Beachhead.

General MacArthur rested much of his decision on his knowledge of American amphibious capabilities. During World War II he had experienced success with similar flanking movements against the Japanese. Because of the vocal opposition to the Inchon plan by many, including Naval leaders, MacArthur must have surely been aware of the great potential for failure. But his experience with the Navy led him to confidence. Eyewitness accounts of the historic meeting of 23 August, when the senior military leaders of the United States assented to his Inchon proposal, reveal his confidence.

Finally, with complete confidence in the Navy, their rich experience in staging amphibious landings in the Pacific, he considered the



amphibious landing as the most powerful tool of warfare in an insular area.<sup>22</sup>

Another major category of information necessary to the commander is the general category of technical information. It of course includes such critical items as weather and terrain. Napoleon placed detailed calculation at the head of his list of essential intellectual qualities for high command.<sup>23</sup> General MacArthur's concern with this area is impressive and seems to have aided him in his Inchon decision.

MacArthur ordered Admiral James T. Doyle, his amphibious expert, to make a thorough examination of the technical details of an Inchon landing. G2 turned out terrain study No. 13 and Handbook No. 65, "Seoul and Vicinity." They were comparable to the Baedekers studies which were a conspicuous feature of MacArthur's assaults in New Guinea.<sup>24</sup> MacArthur's aerial photos, parachute drops, and additional topographic studies all gave him detailed technical information. He clearly considered such data as he stated,

The Navy's objections to tides, hydrography, terrain, and physical handicaps are indeed substantial and pertinent. But they are not insuperable.<sup>25</sup>

Technical data considerations had a significant impact, but not an overruling impact, on the Inchon decision.

#### Assessment Requirements

Following the gathering of available information pertinent to the high-risk option, the commander must make an assessment of

the relevance of that information (and lack of information) to the success or failure of the decision. Here his powers of the intellect, his intuitive faculties, and his experience come into great play. He must see beyond the mere data and assess the meaning of it. Clausewitz wrote,

Since all information and assumptions are open to doubt, and with chance at work everywhere, the commander finds that things are not as he expected.... If the mind is to emerge unscathed from this relentless struggle with the unforeseen, two qualities are indispensable: first an intellect that, even in the darkest hour, retains some glimmerings of the inner light which leads to truth; and second, the courage to follow that faint light wherever it may lead. The first of these is described by the French term, coup d'oeil; the second is determination.... Action can never be based on anything firmer than instinct, a sensing of the truth.<sup>56</sup>

The effective assessment of the information available, as well as the relevance of that information not available, assumes a degree of coup d'oeil inherent in the operational commander. That assessment will be herein described in three preliminary steps followed by a culminating step. The preliminary steps are an assessment of: the measure of uncertainty, the potential for success and its impact, and the potential for failure and its impact. The assessment culminates with a weighing of the potential of success and its impact against the potential of failure and its corresponding impact.

Clausewitz wrote, "... three quarters of the factors on which war is based are wrapped in a fog of greater or lesser uncertainty."<sup>57</sup> German General Lothar Rendulic suggests that in

making a decision, the commander considers, among other things, such intangibles as uncertainty about the enemy.<sup>20</sup> The commander must know the bounds of the information he has received and make an assessment of the potential impact of the gaps in that knowledge. Then he has a better idea of the degree of uncertainty of the risk he is accepting.

In considering his high-risk option, the operational commander must assess the potential for or probability of success and the impact of success on his operational aim. The decision depends on both. High probability of success, but with little corresponding impact may warrant little risk, whereas moderately low probability of success, yet with exceptionally favorable impact may argue for the acceptance of greater risk. Consider the assessments of Generals MacArthur and Clark.

Most arguments against the Inchon landing rested largely on the great difficulty of getting X Corps safely onto the Inchon beaches. Tides were hazardous, the entire hydrography was risky, and the beaches provided great defensible terrain for the enemy. The probability for a successful landing was not high and MacArthur received plenty of arguments suggesting that was the case. Yet MacArthur overrode that low probability with the consideration of Inchon's huge potential impact should it be successful. His remarks on 23 August reveal that consideration.

by seizing Seoul I would completely paralyze the enemy's supply system - coming and going. This in turn would paralyze the fighting power of the troops that now face Walker....<sup>21</sup>

Then after noting the opportunities for failure, MacArthur added,

But Inchon will not fail. Inchon will succeed.  
And it will save 100,000 lives.<sup>60</sup>

In contrast, General Clark accepted risk by his failure to concentrate forces toward Rome. There was no corresponding increase elsewhere in contribution to his operational aim. General Alexander wrote in his memoirs, "The battle ended in a decisive victory for us, but it was not as complete as it might have been."<sup>61</sup> General Clark's decision accepted greater risk without a correspondingly greater potential for success or favorable impact on the operational aim.

Closely related to the above assessment of the probability and impact of success is that of the probability and impact of failure. In a high-risk situation, failure must be considered. If the probability of failure is sufficiently high and the impact catastrophic, any action short of a potential "war stopper" ought to be discarded.

General Clark appears to have failed properly to consider both the possibility and impact of failure. He apparently attempted to satisfy at least the letter of General Alexander's order to attack toward Valmontone while still seeking achievement of his own aim. But the opportunity for failure on both counts was great and should have been considered. Failure to penetrate the Alban Hills rapidly would be costly in the attack toward Rome. Failure to reach Valmontone rapidly would allow the German force successfully to withdraw northward. Clark felt that failure

in the latter would have no significant impact.<sup>42</sup>

General MacArthur was aware of the arguments for the high probability of failure. But he also felt that he could avoid an excessive loss should failure occur. Regarding the possibility of failure, he wrote,

If my estimate is inaccurate and should I run into a defense with which I cannot cope, I will be there personally and will immediately withdraw our forces before they are committed to a bloody setback.<sup>43</sup>

After assessing the potential impact of both success and failure of a high-risk decision, the operational commander must weigh the value of each. Because of many immeasurable characteristics of war which Clausewitz labels uncertainties, friction, chance, and moral elements, this step tests the "genius" of the operational commander. Mathematical assessments are of limited value. Instinct and intuition, garnered through experience and training, as well as a keen intellect, provide the bulk of these considerations. Recognizing that we see with the clear vision of a Monday morning quarterback, the use of Inchon and Rome illustrates this critical step.

General MacArthur had a clear view of the great potential, albeit low probability, of success at Inchon. He recognized that Inchon could prevent the expenditure of up to 100,000 lives should Eighth Army be forced to attack up the peninsula without the Inchon envelopment. Failure at Inchon promised a loss of considerably fewer than the 100,000 lives success would gain. In

comparing the impact of success with that of failure, the Inchon decision made sense.

In retrospect, we see that General Clark's decision revealed a less lucid weighing. Success at Rome yielded no great operational advantage. Rome was going to fall in any case; no larger portion of the German force would be destroyed. Sidney Mathews, writing in Command Decisions, stated that had Clark continued on the Valmontone axis he would have reached Rome more quickly than he was able to by the route he ultimately chose.<sup>64</sup> He accepted greater risk for no greater operational value.

The assessments of uncertainty, success, failure, and their relative weights serve as the heart of high-risk decision making. They flow from the clear understanding of the ends of the operation and from the contribution of information gathered. But the coup d'oeil, the intuitive powers of the commander, drive this portion of the high-risk decision. The "genius" of the operational commander is revealed here.

#### Bolstering the Decision

As the high-risk decision is made, associated decisions can be made which bolster or shore up the success of the decision. Surprise may give the decision that additional opportunity for success that tips the balance in its favor. Clausewitz writes,

Surprise therefore, becomes the means to gain superiority, but because of its psychological effect it should be considered as an independent element. Whenever it is achieved on a grand scale, it confuses the enemy and lowers his morale; many examples, great and small, show how this in turn multiplies the results.<sup>65</sup>

The decision to persevere after the high-risk decision is made, if not weighted down by inflexibility, may also serve as the weight that tips the balance favorably. Clausewitz refers to this perseverance in the commander as "determination," a necessary quality of military genius.<sup>66</sup> Napoleon stated, "True wisdom for a general is vigorous determination."<sup>67</sup> General Rendulic wrote that success for the Germans in World War II, when situations seemed untenable, was often a result of their holding the "...longest breath in the last quarter-hour."<sup>68</sup>

Formation of a reserve or the placement of a reserve to decrease the potential of major failure or to increase the impact of success may assist in the execution of the high-risk decision. Boldness in the decision's execution will assist. The selection of the unit or commander who executes the most critical portion of the action may affect that boldness and success.

In reviewing the Inchon and Rome decisions, we see how MacArthur's associated decisions bolstered the high-risk Inchon decision and how Clark's failed to assist. Success was shored up at Inchon; it was not at Rome.

General MacArthur bolstered his decision with his personal resolve and with his careful consideration of the timing of the X Corps and Eighth Army attacks. MacArthur believed that the very high-risk nature of the Inchon decision guaranteed surprise. He insisted on an early execution of the landing, recognizing that a month's delay would allow the enemy to strengthen its

beach defenses at Inchon. He timed the Eighth Army's attack northward to provide the greatest pressure and effect on the totally surprised North Korean forces.<sup>69</sup> As MacArthur was boarding the flagship, the Mt. McKinley, in preparation for the landing, a storm broke out, threatening disaster for X Corps. MacArthur received a message from Washington implying that the operation should be abandoned.<sup>70</sup> He remained steadfast. MacArthur's decisions that affected the elements of surprise, maximum pressure on the enemy at a critical time, and determination, all served to bolster the success of his high-risk decision.

General Clark's actions and decisions reveal no great bolstering of his high-risk option. His decision to disregard the clear intentions of General Alexander bespeak a willingness to be bold, but beyond that there appears to be a lack of consideration for the effect of associated decisions. Sidney Mathews reported that Clark considered three options before making his Rome decision. One option was to follow General Alexander's plan. One was to concentrate the entire VI Corps in the direction of Rome. The third option, which Clark chose, sent a less concentrated force toward Rome and a reinforced division toward Valmontone.<sup>71</sup> Either the first or second option appears to provide more decisive results and less chance of failure.

General Clark delayed his decision to attack toward Rome, resulting in lost time in the redirection of the X Corps units. That lost time limited the surprise of the offensive stroke and



provided time for the shifting of German forces to counter it. The divided force and delay in Clark's decision both reveal an element of indecision or lack of boldness that failed to boster success.

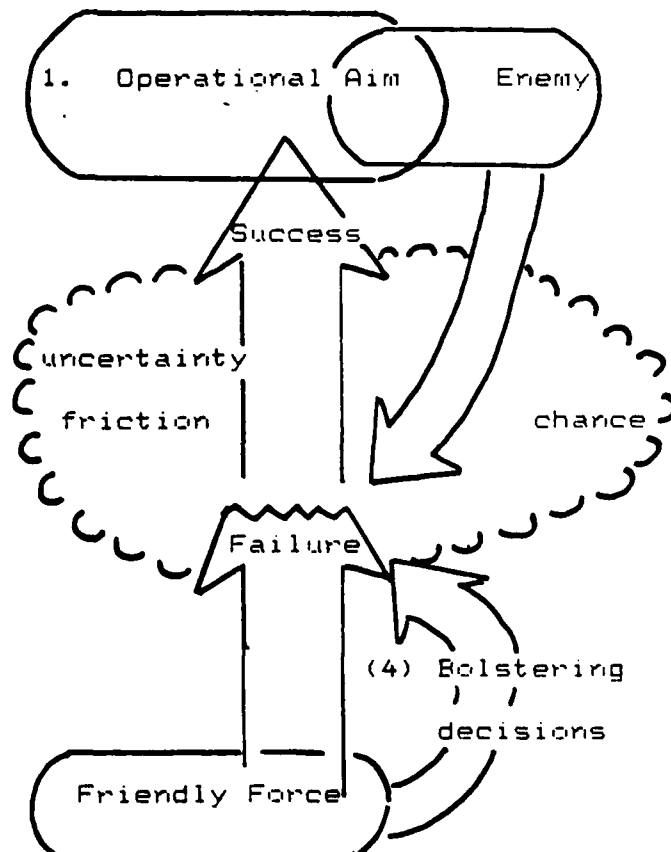
General MacArthur's decision to conduct the Inchon landing and General Clark's decision to attack toward Rome are instructive in viewing a process for deciding in conditions of high risk. MacArthur's decision making process was thorough and focused; Clark's was less so. Granting that this is a retrospective analysis of those dimensions, we see the impact of the process on the ultimate success or lack thereof of the decisions. MacArthur's decision turned the tide of the war. Clark's was of little operational consequence.

## SECTION V: CONCLUSIONS

The soundness of a high-risk decision is largely dependent on the thoroughness of the decision-making process. Risk must be accepted in war, but the selection of which risks will be accepted significantly impacts on operational success and failure. A sound decision-making process does not guarantee the success of the high-risk decision, since war is by nature filled with chance and uncertainty. But, a sound process combined with the competence and leadership of the commander may improve the chances for success.

The high-risk decision process involves four major components. They are depicted in the model below.

Information (2) leading to an assessment (3) of success, failure, and uncertainty.



The first of the components (identified as #1) is consideration of the operational aim. It defines the "ends" of the operation. Without this consideration, there is little practical purpose for the decision. The gist of the operational art is to sequence actions so as to accomplish the operational and ultimately the strategic aims. If the option considered bears little relevance to the aim, that option may be discarded as an impractical candidate for accepting high risk. If it bears great relevance, high risk may be acceptable.

The second consideration merely supports the third and fourth components, yet it is an indispensable step. Information considerations constitute this step. The operational commander must identify which information (2) is essential for his decision and then direct and focus the information-gathering effort. Those requirements necessarily include among others, enemy, friendly, and technical information. Beyond information on the general enemy situation, information must reveal the enemy's capability to respond to the success of the high-risk decision as well as his capacity to exploit any potential failure of that decision. Friendly information must also identify the friendly force's ability to exploit success of the action and to effectively react to a failure in order to limit its potential adverse impact.

The heart of the decision-making process lies in the assessment (3) component. Here the judgment and intuitive skills of the commander are tested. In a high-risk decision, the

commander must recognize the amount and potential effect of the uncertainty and chance he faces. When little is known or knowable, risk increases dramatically. He must assess both the probability and potential impact of successful execution of the decision, as well as the probability and impact of failure. Finally, he must intuitively weigh the potential (probability and impact) of success against that of failure to determine the merits of the high-risk option.

Once the decision is made, the process culminates with associated decisions that shore up the success of the high-risk option (4). The use of reserves, the timing of actions and decisions, the surprise achieved, and the boldness and determination with which the decision is executed all assist in bolstering the success of the high risk decision.

AirLand Battle doctrine proposes the acceptance of risk in order to achieve and maintain the initiative on the battlefield. High-risk failure at the operational level will often spell disaster in major proportion. On the other hand, success in high risk actions may breed decisive results of operational and strategic proportions. As US Army leadership doctrine states, senior leaders require competence at decision making in conditions of risk for the successful prosecution of modern war.

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